

Dimensions of Dealing with School Violence and Disruption in Primary Schools: Perspectives from South African Teachers

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Abstract

Violence and aggression in South African primary schools present significant challenges for both teachers and learners. This qualitative study explored how 178 foundation phase teachers from 31 primary schools across three provinces in South Africa, namely, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, manage school violence and disruption daily. Using focus-group interviews, the research examined strategies that can help manage violent and disruptive behaviour. The data were analysed through Rahim's model of conflict management, which was also the study's theoretical framework. The findings revealed that teachers predominantly utilised integrating strategies, followed by obliging strategies. Teachers also employed various other techniques, such as providing emotional regulation support, collaborative problem-solving, positive reinforcement, and referral to specialists. The results indicate that, although teachers demonstrate resourcefulness in managing classroom conflicts, they require enhanced professional support, specialised training and greater parental involvement to effectively address persistent violent behaviours. The study recommends the use of Rahim's model to remind educators of alternative ways to deal with violent/aggressive behaviour in children, including fostering compassionate care in schools to help broaden children's perspectives of other people's feelings, and developing empathetic traits. The study also recommends introducing parent and child conflict resolution workshops at schools to assist with challenging family dynamics at home. Future research should adopt mixed and quantitative methods, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts, to test the effectiveness of these interventions, to enhance generalisability, and to promote inclusive education practices when dealing with violent behaviour at school.

UNISA 

Social and Health Sciences

#20559 | 24 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2957-3645/20559>

ISSN 2957-3645 (Online)

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Keywords: violence; aggression; young learners; mitigating violence; violence prevention; Rahim's model of conflict management

Introduction

Violent crimes and violence in general are notoriously high in South Africa, and, unfortunately, these social ills also plague schools in the country (Venketsamy, 2024). The focus of this article relates to how teachers in South Africa deal with these challenges at the primary school level. Dealing with these issues is very demanding and complex, as cases of bullying, fighting and intimidation are reported daily (Prendes Espinosa, 2018; McMahon et al., 2020). A recent example is the Milnerton High School bullying incident, which took place in early October 2025, where a viral video showed several boys repeatedly hitting a fellow pupil with objects, illustrating a severe case of learner-to-learner violence (Ngcobo, 2025). Actions of this nature can disrupt a positive learning environment. Although legislation such as the South African Schools Act (South Africa, 1996a) and the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (South Africa, 2024) mandate that schools ensure safety for both teachers and learners, many violent incidents continue to occur.

Violence in schools can create negative learning experiences, causing lasting psychological trauma, and, in some cases, leading to life-threatening injuries (Ferrara et al., 2019). Violence often distracts learners from pursuing their education and, in some cases, contributes to early school dropout (Frieze, 2015). Exposure to school violence often drives learners into repeated cycles of aggression (Mncube & Harber, 2014). For instance, a child who experiences violence or bullying is more likely to replicate these behaviours by acting out aggressively towards peers and teachers (Venketsamy et al., 2023). Persistent violence can normalise aggressive behaviour in schools, which may increase the risk of fatalities on school grounds (Harger, 2019; Netshitangani, 2014). These violent incidents at school can hinder the development of conflict resolution skills and the psychological mechanisms necessary to manage or contain violence.

Learner violence disrupts the functioning and routine of schools and threatens the safety of both learners and teachers in urban settings. It has been found that urban schools report higher incidents of violence when compared to rural schools (Hochfeld et al., 2022; Schroth et al., 2003; Singh & Steyn, 2014; South African Cities Network, 2024). However, literature remains limited in documenting the experiences of urban primary schools navigating and preventing learner violence (Okeke & Simphiwe, 2024). Against this backdrop, the present study explored how foundation phase teachers address and prevent violence and aggression in South African primary schools. The study also examined how violence between learners and teachers manifests within the school environment. The data were collected from urban schools across three provinces in South African to capture teachers' experiences in dealing with violent behaviour among learners in grades 1 to 3. The overall aim is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on school violence and the strategies employed by teachers to address it.

In this article, it is worth noting that anger is conceptualised as an emotional state, whereas aggression is a behavioural disposition or impulse, and violence is a physical or verbal act causing harm (Allen & Anderson, 2017; Martin et al., 2023). While anger can trigger aggression, and aggression may escalate into violence, the three are not equivalent. This article treats them as points on a continuum rather than synonyms and distinguishes between them where necessary.

Understanding Learner–Teacher Violence

Learner–teacher violence can be understood as aggressive or dangerous deeds directed towards the teacher. Whether through physical actions to the body (ie striking, beating, kicking, pushing), verbal expressions (ie yelling, taunting, offending) or psychological tactics (ie mentally challenging a teacher, scheming, intimidation) (De Wet, 2021). This is why Anderman et al. (2018, p. 623) defined the term as “multi-systemic actions perpetrated against teachers within the social contexts of schools, neighbourhoods, and social media”. The acts are “multi-systemic because they involve complex dynamics that affect teachers and other school personnel, as well as students, parents, and the entire community” (Anderman et al., 2018, p. 623). Therefore, the effects of learner–teacher violence extend beyond the classroom.

A less visible form of violence towards teachers involves passive violence. Research indicates that South African teachers will experience at least two or more types of passive violence from learners during their careers (Venketsamy, 2024). Some examples include learners’ use of foul language, malicious gossip, defiance, yelling at a teacher when upset, or showing crude signs (Ribeiro et al., 2015; Wilkins et al., 2014). In other areas, learners have threatened teachers, clicked their tongues, expressed racial remarks, or stared at the teacher in an annoying manner (Baxen, 2021; Espelage et al., 2013). The problem with passive violence, in many ways, is that it frames the focus on teachers enduring the victimisation rather than investigating the teachers’ responses to such incidents. This study therefore seeks to highlight some of the approaches and techniques teachers utilise when handling violence/aggression in primary schools (for example, addressing, avoiding or ignoring the behaviour). According to De Vos and Kirsten (2015), passive violence is often associated with negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, sleeping difficulties, and strained relationships with learners. This can result in disrupted learning, poor classroom management, absenteeism, and even a change of profession (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; McMahon et al., 2024).

Reasons for Learner–Teacher Violence

Living in unstable homes, coupled with parental disputes, has been found to affect children’s emotional regulation (Gasa, 2012). This is because the events they witness and certain parenting styles can influence how they manage and communicate their emotions, as well as how they resolve conflicts with others (Sibisi et al., 2024). Violence at home can include the abuse of a parent, direct maltreatment, or witnessing substance

abuse. Alongside these, other domestic challenges such as divorce, unemployment, grief, and separation from loved ones further compound the development of aggressive behaviour. In South Africa, children grow up in a variety of family arrangements that extend beyond the traditional nuclear household. Data from Stats SA (2022) indicate that about one-third of children (33.8%) live with both parents, while 45.5% live primarily with their mothers and 18.8% live with neither parent, often being cared for by extended family members or other guardians (Moleya, 2025). These patterns reflect broader social, economic and historical dynamics experienced in the country.

It is worth noting that family structure alone does not determine children's well-being, as many children raised in single-parent or extended-family households experience stable and supportive caregiving. It is rather the challenges that arise when households experience sustained stress, conflict or limited resources (Gasa, 2012). Under such conditions, children may exhibit defiant or disruptive behaviour in the learning environment. In some instances, these behaviours may reflect attempts to gain recognition, belonging, or social status by displaying toughness. Young children may also become vulnerable to criminal activities, such as running errands for gangs or selling drugs, which increases their exposure to violence (Esposito et al., 2022; Mutongoza, 2023). These experiences can subsequently spill over into the school environment, where aggression may manifest through bullying peers, displaying unruly behaviour or confronting teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

Violence and Self-Regulation

Self-regulation can be understood as processes of self-directed planning, controlling and evaluating one's own emotions and behaviours (Pekrun, 2021). It is a sub-component of executive functions, and mastering the skill is important when engaging with others, resisting temptation, and refraining from actions that could hurt others or oneself (De Carvalho Etokabeka et al., 2023). Children who grow up in adverse environments often lose opportunities to develop and strengthen self-regulatory behaviour. This is largely because abusive or highly conflictual households may lack the modelling of healthy social and emotional skills, with confrontational or aggressive responses often used to deal with challenges. As a result, children may struggle to regulate their emotions and behaviour when faced with provocation. In school settings, interactions among learners with limited self-regulatory skills can easily escalate, as minor conflicts may trigger anger-driven responses that lead to violence or aggression (Denson et al., 2011; Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2024). For this reason, the ability to override provocation and resist acting on immediate impulses is a critical component of self-regulation, particularly in demanding or emotionally charged situations (Manzano-Sánchez & Valero-Valenzuela, 2019; Taxer & Gross, 2018).

De Cordova et al. (2019) and Țîroiu (2023) verified that, when teachers interact with learners using behaviours rooted in hope, generosity, respect and joy, they can positively influence and transform the conduct of learners who have behavioural problems. That is why most approaches teachers use ought to mirror positive behaviour with the aim to

uplift learners as opposed to demean or tarnish their self-image (Ruttledge, 2022). Harmful behaviours by a teacher – such as belittling the learner, labelling them as troublemakers or removing them from the classroom altogether – can exacerbate rebellious behaviour (Badimo & Masisi, 2025; Hashem, 2015; Mezzalira & Guzzo, 2015). It is acknowledged that rebellious behaviour is not inherently violent or illegitimate; the term here is used to describe defiant conduct that escalates or co-occurs with disruptive or aggressive behaviour.

Research reveals some of the practical classroom strategies and interventions that can be used in situations of this nature. These include opting for private constructive talks instead of embarrassing the child in front of their peers, applying non-verbal cues such as making eye contact to lessen verbal confrontation, or simply playing good behavioural games to get learners proactively engaged in behaving accordingly (Felix, 2011; Lane et al., 2025; Oliver et al., 2011). Teachers who adopt a flexible and adaptable approach are more likely to develop open, trusting relationships with learners, which would avoid applying rigid disciplinary actions. This is why teachers ought to explore further options when dealing with violence and aggression in class (Negoiță, 2025; Țiroiu, 2023). It would enable them to adapt or alter their approach with learners. In some cases, challenging learners may encourage them to view teachers as individuals who understand their circumstances, which fosters more respectful engagement with the teacher (Maring & Koblinsky, 2013).

The scholarly literature identifies two primary categories of emotional regulation strategies that teachers can employ against disruptive or aggressive behaviour: preventive and responsive. Preventive strategies aim to influence the onset or intensity of an emotional experience before it occurs (Cavanaugh et al., 2021). This can be achieved through four key methods, namely, selecting or avoiding certain situations, modifying the context, redirecting attention and cognitively reframing the situation. Responsive strategies, on the other hand, are employed after an emotion has been triggered. These strategies seek to intensify, reduce, extend or shorten the emotional experience, its expression or its physiological impact (Taxman, 2020). In real-time classroom situations, techniques such as self-talk, deep breathing, or controlled facial expressions can help teachers manage their emotional responses (Oye, 2024). Outside the classroom, teachers may engage in additional emotion regulation techniques, such as physical exercise or peer discussions. These peer discussions, whether during a morning break or after school, can serve as opportunities to debrief and act as coping mechanisms to address reciprocal violence and aggression in schools (Badimo & Masisi, 2025). It is worth noting that these strategies are not exclusive to teachers but can also be utilised by individuals in other professions or contexts (Perry et al., 2024).

Coping with Violence in Schools

Over the past decade, the development of psychosocial programmes has given rise to intervention models designed to promote mental health and well-being in educational settings for both teachers and learners (Eiraldi et al., 2012). This shift reflects a broader

trend in educational psychology, which, while once primarily focused on human disorders, impaired functioning and the prevention of psychosocial syndromes, has increasingly emphasised fostering human potential and overall well-being (Bonilla et al., 2020; Tringali & Ferrari, 2025). In line with this progression, schools across the world have introduced a variety of psychosocial interventions to improve the overall school climate (Eiraldi et al., 2012).

Among these, two prominent intervention models, namely, expert behavioural consultancy and effective behavioural support, have shown promising results in fostering positive whole-school environments and reducing violence (Vancraeyveldt et al., 2015). These programmes have proven effective not only in lowering behavioural problems among learners and decreasing the need for disciplinary action but also in contributing to safer, more supportive school environments (Bonilla et al., 2020). In the South African context, however, teachers often turn to collaborative and innovative strategies tailored to their specific circumstances (Boxer & Sloan-Power, 2013). Collegial support, in particular, is a widely used approach for addressing and mitigating learner-to-teacher violence, underscoring the importance of unity and teamwork in sustaining a functional and secure schooling environment (Badimo & Masisi, 2025; Grobler, 2016). For example, a teacher who feels threatened by a grade 12 learner may request the presence of a colleague during a tense interaction. The presence of another staff member can help de-escalate situations where a learner attempts to intimidate or dominate the teacher. Teachers have reported that such collaboration can significantly reduce confrontations with learners (Botha & Zwane, 2021; Perry et al., 2024).

Despite these efforts, policy-driven initiatives by the Department of Basic Education – including the Safety in Education Partnership, the Safety in Education Pledge, and the School Safety Framework – have largely fallen short in practice (Baxen, 2021). Although the Constitution of South Africa (South Africa, 1996b) guarantees the safety and protection of all citizens through its Bill of Rights, including teachers in school settings, many educators still face the daily reality of unruly behaviour. Many of these children lack essential social skills, have underdeveloped self-regulation, and suffer from academic difficulties rooted in adverse home circumstances. This has led to widespread scepticism among teachers, who often view such interventions as well-intentioned but poorly implemented (Baxen, 2021). By acknowledging these concerns, this article unpacks the processes through which primary school teachers deal with violence. The sections below outline the theoretical framework that guided the present study, its methodology and findings.

Theoretical Framework

Rahim's model of conflict management styles for interpersonal conflicts (Rahim, 2023; Zurlo et al., 2020) aims to describe conflict and negotiation processes based on two dimensions: concern for self, where individuals satisfy their own needs in the conflict management process, and concern for others, where people attempt to meet the needs

of others. The model highlights five conflict management dimensions, namely, integrating, compromising, obliging, avoiding and dominating strategies (Zurlo et al., 2020).

Integrating strategies incorporate reasoning with the learner inside or outside the classroom setting, or involving the child in discussing their behaviour. Compromising strategies involve reasoning and discussing behavioural problems with the learner and/or with the entire class to identify possible innovative solutions. Obliging strategies deal with accommodating and/or deliberately ignoring minor disruptions in the class, whereas avoiding strategies involve delaying discussions and direct confrontations with the disruptive learner. One way to implement the avoiding strategy is to send the disruptive learner to the deputy principal's office. Lastly, dominating strategies deal with the teacher issuing a verbal warning to the child, asking them to leave the classroom or requesting the principal to suspend the child from the school (Kassim & Ibrahim, 2014; Zurlo et al., 2020).

The application of Rahim's model in a schooling context is relevant as the strategies to deal with conflict in the school environment align with Rahim's postulations (Chen et al., 2019; Todorova et al., 2022). This is because teachers are constantly involved in negotiating with learners to show the appropriate behaviour at school to achieve academic goals and to grow as human beings. The responses teachers choose to employ need to relate to the ability of managing the classroom, as well as handling different children's different personality styles (Ullah, 2022). It is a daunting task to ensure teachers' own well-being while supporting learners who have different needs and pose different challenges. This study therefore seeks to identify various ways of dealing with children who show signs of violence and aggression to encourage teachers to use different strategies to achieve classroom management.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study strategy to explore how teachers dealt with and prevented violence/aggression in the learning environment. A case study design was chosen, as it aligns with the interpretivist paradigm and is well suited to qualitative inquiry (Tisdell et al., 2025). The design was selected to explore the experiences of schools across South Africa (Maree, 2020).

Sampling and Research Sites

Official permission to conduct the research with foundation phase teachers was obtained from the Department of Basic Education and the University of Stellenbosch's ethics commission board. Thirty-one primary schools in three provinces participated in the study (10 schools in two provinces and 11 in the other). Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape were selected based on recent reports identifying these provinces as the most affected by violence in the country (Bruce, 2023). It is worth noting that, while the study mostly contains urban schools, these schools do not represent the unique

challenges and educational landscapes faced by schools located in more rural or impoverished provinces, such as the Eastern Cape, Limpopo or North West. Therefore, the experiences of foundation phase teachers in these excluded regions may be shaped by factors such as resource availability, community structures, and linguistic contexts that remain largely overlooked in the present study.

The schools in this study were randomly selected and contacted telephonically to determine their willingness to participate. Both public and private schools were included to ensure representation across different socio-economic contexts. The participating schools and participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, objectives and ethical considerations. The principal and the teachers were requested to sign consent forms. The information sheet emphasised their rights to anonymity, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences. The ethical consideration observed during the study included keeping the information confidential. The researchers stored the data securely (using a password-protected file), which could only be accessed by authorised individuals.

Data Collection

The data were collected through focus-group interviews with 178 foundation phase teachers (grades 1–3, teaching children aged 6–9 years). Focus groups were selected because they provide a collaborative platform for participants to share experiences and collectively generate in-depth insights into the research topic. This method is particularly valuable for exploring and eliciting insider perspectives (Gundumogula, 2020). To facilitate the process, the researchers contacted each school principal to arrange a suitable date and time for the visit and to identify an appropriate space where the focus-group interview could be conducted. One focus-group interview was held in each of the 31 participating primary schools with foundation phase teachers who were willing to take part in the study. A standardised set of open-ended questions was used to ensure consistency across the different groups while still allowing the participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences. This approach encouraged the teachers to engage in guided discussions about the violence and disruption they encounter in their classrooms and the strategies they use to manage these challenges.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. First, all interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data and to gain an overall understanding of the participants' responses. Meaningful segments of text relevant to the research questions were then identified and assigned initial codes. The coding process followed an inductive approach, allowing codes to emerge from the data. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns within the dataset. These categories were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' perspectives. Finally, the categories were

interpreted in relation to the study's research questions, and relevant quotations were used to support the findings and discussions.

The software tool that was used to assist with analysing the information and the participants' feedback was PDFgear. PDFgear is a multi-platform PDF software offering comprehensive tools for viewing, editing, annotating, converting and managing PDF documents. It is a feature-rich platform that provides core functionalities such as text/image editing, merging/splitting, and format conversion (to Word, Excel, etc). The systematic approach enabled the extraction of significant, rich data. The data were compared across schools to identify patterns of similarity and difference; this was to enable the researchers to collate the findings and discussion section.

Findings

The findings focus on how foundation phase teachers respond to and prevent violence and aggression in South African primary schools. The participants' responses were drawn from focus-group interviews conducted in 31 schools across Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. These responses were analysed using Rahim's model of conflict management, which includes five dimensions: integrating, obliging, dominating, compromising and avoiding strategies. Overall, the integrating strategy was reported most frequently (eight responses), followed by obliging (seven), dominating (five), compromising (four) and avoiding (three). A provincial pattern also emerged: teachers in KwaZulu-Natal tended to favour obliging strategies, whereas teachers in Gauteng and the Western Cape frequently applied integrating strategies. While these patterns provide insight into teachers' preferred strategies, the participants' narratives also reveal tensions between supportive, relational approaches and more disciplinary practices used to maintain classroom order.

Integrating Strategies

Integrating strategies – characterised by open dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and engagement with the emotional roots of behaviour – were the most prominent across the data. The teachers frequently described structured one-on-one conversations aimed at encouraging learners to reflect on their behaviour. A teacher from Gauteng (school 15) explained: "I have a sit down with them: Tell me what you did. Why did you do it? Do you think what you did is the right way to have handled it?" The same teacher added, "there's always a punishment, I'm sorry. I believe in it. You need to know, if you do something bad, something bad is going to happen." Corporal punishment is illegal in South African schools, and so when teachers refer to punishing children, as in this case, it does not refer to inflicting physical pain. While the approach suggests an attempt to balance dialogue with accountability, the immediate pairing of reflection may limit the effectiveness of having a genuine conversation to provide behavioural insight. In such instances, reflective engagement risks becoming a precursor to discipline rather than a space for collaborative problem-solving.

Several teachers also emphasised the importance of addressing learners' emotional states when managing aggression. A teacher in Gauteng (school 17) explained that they would sit with a learner to "engage with her and ask her questions, because this is the anger that causes the child to behave like that". Here, the teacher targets the emotional antecedent of aggressive behaviour rather than the act itself. Similarly, a teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 4) reported: "In our classes, we teach learners how to deal with anger issues. And we also tell them, if somebody does something to you, tell the teacher." These approaches reflect an effort to support emotional intelligence among young learners. However, directing learners to report conflict to the teacher assumes that the teacher is consistently perceived as a safe and trusted authority figure, which may not always be the case in classrooms where relationships have already become strained.

Some teachers also described modelling emotional awareness in the classroom. A teacher in the Western Cape (school 14) explained: "I will also tell them when I'm frustrated . . . so that they can understand why I am mad and angry." While this strategy may humanise the teacher and encourage empathy, it also requires careful balance, as younger learners may not yet possess the emotional maturity to interpret adult frustration constructively. In addition, the teachers highlighted the role of awareness programmes and workshops. For instance, a teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 9) described organising sessions where "someone come in to talk about bullying in our classes in their language". Such initiatives suggest an awareness that communication about conflict must be accessible and culturally relevant to resonate with learners.

Obliging Strategies

Obliging strategies were particularly common among the participants in KwaZulu-Natal and were characterised by non-confrontational responses and supportive classroom practices. They described using music, singing, games and other activities to redirect learners' attention and reduce tension in the classroom. A teacher from KwaZulu-Natal (school 5) explained: "I've been teaching them singing and praying ever since I started, from January. Maybe if you put some music." While music and routine activities may create a calming classroom environment, the response also suggests that these practices function more as general classroom management techniques rather than targeted interventions for episodes of aggression.

The teachers also emphasised the importance of responding to learners with care and empathy. A teacher in Gauteng (school 7) described the supportive environment in their school: "We hug them anyway, we love them . . . whenever they see a need, they have always gone out of their way to buy that child a pencil, share their lunch with the child." Similarly, a teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 8) explained: "When he wanted me to shout at him, I would like show him more love, speak to him in a polite way than screaming and shouting." These responses indicate a recognition that some learners' disruptive behaviour may stem from unmet emotional or social needs. However, they also highlight the extent to which teachers often compensate for broader systemic

shortcomings, such as limited social support or family instability, by providing emotional and sometimes material support.

The participants also highlighted the use of positive reinforcement as a strategy to shift attention from negative behaviour to constructive actions. One teacher in Gauteng (school 2) noted: “Complimenting when he has done good. Because you always focus on the negative.” While this approach aligns with strengths-based behavioural management practices, the comment also implies that classroom responses to behaviour may often remain reactive, focusing more on correcting disruptions than on proactively cultivating positive conduct.

Dominating Strategies

Dominating strategies were generally used when aggressive behaviour posed an immediate risk to other learners and required firm intervention. The participants reported issuing warnings, involving parents, assigning detention, and removing learners from the classroom to restore order. A teacher from KwaZulu-Natal (school 12) explained the role of parental involvement: “I think it’s quite important to call the parents . . . you tell them, I’ll call your parents.” Although parental engagement can be valuable, the phrasing suggests that contact with parents may sometimes be framed as a threat rather than as a collaborative strategy for supporting the learner.

Some teachers also referred to the use of detention as a disciplinary response. A teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 13) noted: “Detention. But the child loves being detained.” This remark is significant because it indicates that disciplinary practices may not always function as intended. If a learner perceives detention as desirable – perhaps because it provides individual attention or a calmer environment – the strategy may unintentionally reinforce disruptive behaviour rather than discourage it.

In other cases, the teachers described separating learners from the group to prevent further conflict. A teacher in the Western Cape (school 18) explained: “I always punish her. Take her to her room, sit there. She was so violent. So you could see that maybe something that is happening at home.” Similarly, another teacher in the Western Cape (school 19) reported: “I need to keep him more away from the group; he must sit there on his little island alone. Because he cannot be with the other learners.” While separation may temporarily protect other learners, prolonged exclusion from peers may also intensify feelings of isolation and potentially reinforce the very behaviours teachers are attempting to prevent.

Compromising Strategies

Compromising strategies involved negotiated responses and structured opportunities for learners to regain control of their emotions. The participants described allowing learners to step away briefly from the classroom environment when they became overwhelmed. For example, a teacher from KwaZulu-Natal (school 1) explained: “Get up. If you see

me, get up. Please take a walk. Go wash your face. Drink water. And then come back. Have some fresh air.” This approach demonstrates an awareness that environmental changes can assist learners in regulating strong emotions. However, such strategies depend on classroom conditions that allow learners to step away safely without disrupting supervision or learning.

Some teachers also developed reward systems to encourage positive behaviour. A teacher in the Western Cape (school 20) described implementing an individualised strategy: “If he hadn’t hit anyone for five days . . . his first belonging was a little book about the sea. When he was aggressive, he would sit with that book and it calmed him down.” This example illustrates a thoughtful attempt to connect behavioural management with a learner’s personal interests. Nevertheless, such individualised interventions require time and attention that may be difficult to sustain in overcrowded classrooms.

The teachers also emphasised values-based guidance and accountability. For instance, a teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 10) stated: “What I teach the kids in my class and my own children is treat others the way you want to be treated.” Another teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 26) described encouraging learners to take responsibility for their actions: “They must apologise to the teacher, and apologise to the whole class for disturbing them.” While moral guidance and public accountability may encourage social awareness, they may be less effective when learners are dealing with emotional dysregulation or external stressors that influence their behaviour.

Avoiding Strategies

Avoiding strategies were the least frequently reported and generally involved referring learners to other professionals or senior staff members. The teachers indicated that some behavioural issues required support beyond what could be managed in the classroom. A teacher in Gauteng (school 12) explained: “We have a school therapist. Social worker. That comes and deals with things that we can’t handle in the classroom.” This response reflects an important recognition that behavioural challenges may require specialised intervention.

Other participants described sending learners to senior staff when situations escalated. A teacher in KwaZulu-Natal (school 25) stated: “Send them to another teacher. Call the HOD [head of department]. So you send them to say calm down.” While this strategy may provide immediate relief for the teacher and the class, frequent reliance on referral may also indicate the limits of classroom-based support structures.

The teachers also recognised that some learners’ behaviour may be linked to broader social and family challenges. A teacher in Gauteng (school 6) noted: “Also involve social workers . . . because these parents also they have a lot going on in their lives.” This observation reflects a more systemic understanding of aggression, acknowledging

that children's behaviour often emerges from complex home and community contexts rather than solely from individual dispositions.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that foundation phase teachers employ a range of strategies to manage and prevent violence and aggression in the classroom. Integrating strategies were most commonly used, reflecting an emphasis on dialogue, emotional understanding, and collaborative problem-solving. However, the participants' responses also reveal tensions between supportive and disciplinary approaches, as teachers frequently combine relational strategies with punitive measures to maintain classroom control. Dominating and avoiding strategies were generally reserved for situations involving immediate safety concerns or where additional professional support was required, highlighting the challenges teachers face when balancing care, authority, and limited institutional resources.

Discussion

Conflict between people often arises when one party feels that their needs are not met or they are treated unfairly (Overton & Lowry, 2013). These needs may include recognition, concerns about the home environment, the desire for a better lifestyle, a lack of attachment to parent(s), and a lack of affection from parents. As a result, violence and aggression can be used to satisfy these needs in the school environment. This is why teachers require support and training to address the needs of learners. If teachers have the skills to deal with the child who is violent, they will feel empowered to help make the learner feel seen and heard. In addition, teachers need to be aware of the different conflict management dimensions so that they can apply various techniques (ie integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising) in different situations. This would ultimately allow them to self-regulate and assist children with behavioural problems. It will also help them to find amicable ways to resolve conflicts in the schooling domain (Segal & Smith, 2018).

The integrating dimension appears to be the most accommodating strategy, as it holds a high concern for both self and others (Rahim & Magner, 1995). Importantly, it is characterised by reciprocal collaboration to reach a mutually acceptable solution. This is often achieved through openness, exchange of information, and careful examination. The style is considered a "win-win" strategy of conflict management, owing to its emphasis on optimising rather than sacrificing for others (Kassim & Ibrahim, 2014; Rahim, 2023; Rahim & Magner, 1995). In this study, different conflict management strategies were employed. In some cases, the teachers provided learners with basic steps to follow when frustrated, helping them to overcome violent behaviour towards peers. This serves as the first building block for initiating self-regulatory behaviour. Another potentially effective strategy is having an anonymous "letter box" on the school grounds, allowing those who struggle to speak openly with teachers to write down their

frustrations and challenges. This provides an opportunity for learners to voice their feelings and opinions. When discussing violence, the teachers emphasised the need to explain procedures in a way the learner could understand. This could be achieved by using children's language or inviting guest speakers who can relate to the issues learners face. Mahon (2010) validates open communication as a means to address conflict.

The obliging dimension indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for others (Zurlo et al., 2020). This approach is characterised by non-confrontational behaviour aimed at minimising differences, seeking commonalities, and sacrificing personal concerns to safeguard relationships (Kassim & Ibrahim, 2014). The participants in this study applied the obliging strategy by introducing activities that helped learners to move past negative emotions or avoid violent and aggressive behaviour. These activities included physical tasks such as dancing, singing and playing games. The literature similarly supports interventions such as singing and dancing when a child becomes violent or aggressive during class, to channel energy into something constructive (Choi et al., 2010; Koshland et al., 2004). Incorporating sensory activities – for example, listening to music or singing songs – can prevent children from continuing disruptive behaviour. Using sensory activities can also help learners to develop awareness of their bodies, enabling them to better communicate their feelings and responses (Latifovna, 2025). The teachers who used this technique said that these activities were introduced to distract learners from negative emotions and instead promote positive moods. They also created fun, light-hearted environments to bring joy to the classroom and to reduce violence and aggression. Lastly, most participants strove to show as much love and affection as possible to make learners feel valued and cared for. Their actions included hugging and giving compliments (Gerhardt, 2014). This aligns with efforts to model positive behaviour instead of allowing violence and aggression to dominate the classroom atmosphere.

Conversely, the participants who used the dominating dimension showed a high concern for self and low concern for others. This is considered a “win-lose” strategy, as the person in an authoritarian or dominant position seeks to defend their stance while disregarding the other person's needs or perspective (Kassim & Ibrahim, 2014; Rahim & Magner, 1995; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Such responses may stem from burnout or inadequate support, leading teachers to lose empathy for disruptive learners. Although domination can be perceived as excluding the disruptive child, in this study it was used to protect other learners and the teacher from repeated victimisation. While many assume educators can endure prolonged exposure to violence and aggression, they often require time away from the aggressive child to prevent escalation. Sending the child to the principal or implementing a “time-out”-rule can ease tense situations. In this study, quiet time away from the classroom often helped children to calm down, reflect on their actions, and consider alternative responses for future conflicts. Being placed in a separate classroom to calm down taught learners to consider the consequences of their actions and take accountability. Once calm, they were allowed to return to class.

The avoiding dimension often indicates low concern for meeting one's own needs and those of others. This strategy is used when teachers do not want to confront conflict directly (Zurlo et al., 2020). It is characterised by withdrawal, passing on or evading a problem (Kassim & Ibrahim, 2014). In this study, avoidance occurred when the teachers involved specialists or senior managers to address violent or aggressive behaviour on their behalf. Avoidance is not necessarily negative, as involving a specialist can be beneficial when dealing with issues teachers are not trained to handle (Ortega et al., 2003). Specialists can provide strategies or refer learners for targeted intervention. Multidisciplinary intervention from different stakeholders can address challenges more effectively than leaving teachers to handle them alone. The key to this strategy is the teacher's willingness to seek help, the principal's openness to request professional support, and the availability of such assistance (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007).

Lastly, the compromising dimension encompasses a balanced concern for self and others. This style involves splitting the difference, exchanging concerns, or finding the middle ground (Kassim & Ibrahim, 2014). The approach requires both the teacher and the learner with challenging behaviour to give up something to reach a mutually acceptable agreement (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Zurlo et al., 2020). In this study, compromise was achieved through rewards for good behaviour. If a learner upheld their end of the behaviour agreement, the teacher rewarded them. To help learners follow acceptable behaviour patterns, the teachers provided practical steps to manage anger at school. Some allowed learners to vent outside the classroom or freshen up (for example, washing their face with cool water) to calm down (Arita, 2009; Fitry et al., 2023). This strategy not only prevented harm to peers but also gave learners time to reflect on their actions. Again, this aligns with the initiation of self-regulatory behaviour. After returning from a "timeout", learners were encouraged to discuss what happened, guided to avoid repeating the behaviour, and reminded of the consequences if it happened again.

Limitation

This study was conducted in only three provinces of South Africa. This scope restricted the obtaining of teachers' diverse perspectives. Comparative responses from other provinces could have provided further insight into how teachers in different provinces deal with conflictual situations in their classrooms. Second, the researchers only used focus-group interviews. Perhaps one-on-one interviews or observational research could have enriched the findings. Observational research, for example, would have also assisted in observing both learners and teachers in the classroom when dealing with violence and aggression. Lastly, the study adopted a qualitative approach, which could affect the interpretation or generalisability of the study's findings. Future research can apply mixed methods or quantitative approaches to capture a larger dataset.

Recommendation

Teachers deal with children with challenging behaviour daily. The government should provide more professional services for each school, especially in the high-risk areas of the country. The different strategies that deal with conflict, as indicated in the Rahim model of conflict management styles for interpersonal conflicts, should be shared with teachers in their training curriculum. Self-regulation exercises could become part of the Life Orientation curriculum. Lastly, future studies should include rural schools in the other South African provinces to compare with the findings of the current study.

Conclusion

The study indicates that foundation phase teachers use various conflict management styles in accordance with Rahim's model to address violence and aggression in their classrooms. This highlights the practical strategies teachers rely on and underscores the importance of structured behavioural adaptations teachers have to employ to manage disruptions in class. The findings suggest that teachers need additional support beyond individual strategies. Schools should therefore strengthen socio-emotional learning in the curriculum, involve parents more actively, and ensure access to professional services to help manage violent or disruptive behaviour. This study was limited in that its focus primarily centred on teachers' experiences without considering learner, parent or contextual school factors that may influence behaviour. Second, using Rahim's model also simplifies the complex nature of school-based violence, indicating a need for broader, more holistic research. The study recommends that solutions focus on desensitising violent/aggressive behaviours, as well as developing socio-emotional regulations in the curriculum. Outside of school and learners' homes, professional help should be readily available to counsel and provide protection for those affected by violence and disruptive behaviour at school. Other stakeholders such as therapists, learners and motivational speakers can also play a role in diffusing behavioural problems in schools. Although violent children often disrupt the flow of learning and teaching processes, this research highlighted several mechanisms to deal with this challenge.

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